

Now playing in Squint-o-vision

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

Hold onto your hats readers, this is going to get ultra-technical!

Computers haven't always come loaded with 64 uber-dynamic megatonnes of RAM and quadrupally-multi-hyper-threaded processors with 97 gigaplop cores. In the early days, games coders couldn't just let their imagination run riot without considering the limitations of the hardware they were working with, so creating a game that would scroll at a reasonable frame rate necessitated cutting some corners.

Often they literally did just that; whole digiwops of screen real estate were cordoned off, hacked away, blackened out, made static, all in a desperate attempt to reduce the strain on the computer's feeble ickle CPU. The most primitive computers wouldn't have had a separate processor for

accelerating the graphics so the poor CPU had to carry the entire world on its shoulders, so to speak.

Leaving behind the hallowed 8-bit days of the Spectrum, Commodore 64 and Amstrad, coders weren't quite so hampered by limited CPU grunt. The Amiga, in particular, was an exceedingly capable machine, yet right up until Commodore's demise, we continued to encounter what appeared to be 'Living in a Post Box' simulators what with their widescreen, letterbox shaped playfields.

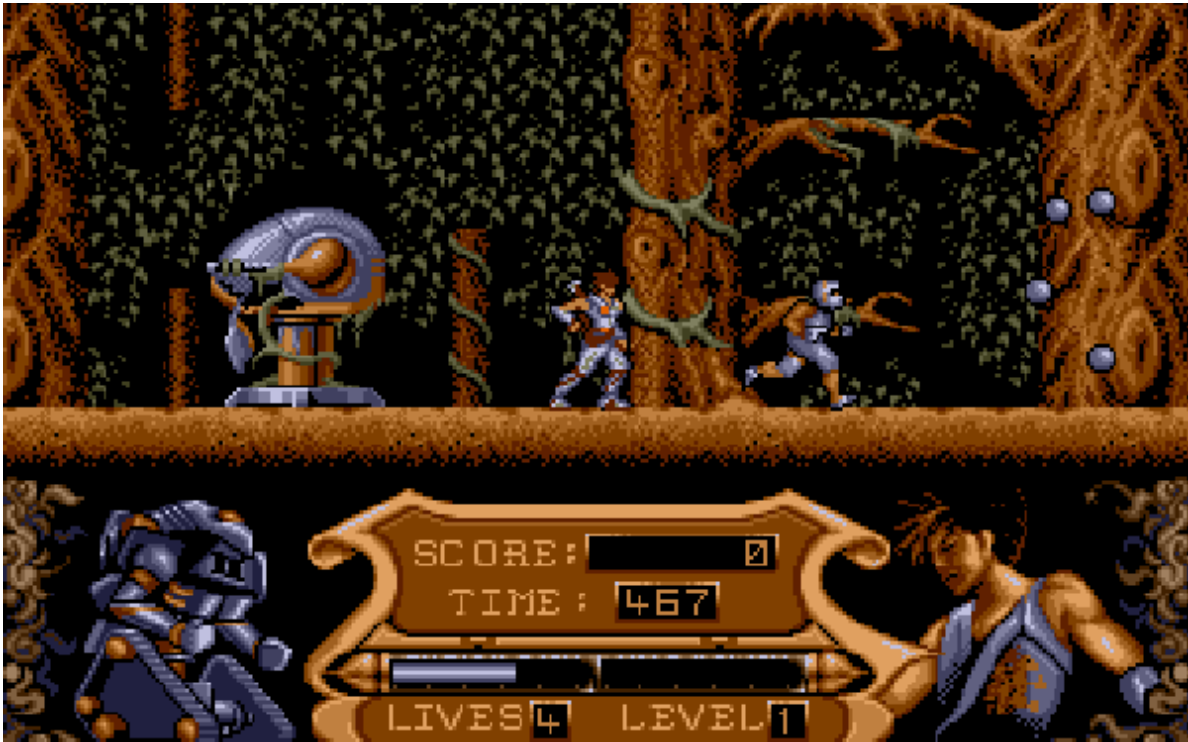
It begs the question, why? Were the coders nostalgically attached to the humongous HUD aesthetic? Did they not know how to exploit the computer's full potential? Were they just shoddy programmers?

It certainly looks like the latter may be true; there *is* a tendency for games vaunting ludicrously over-inflated HUDs to be absolutely dire. OK, I'll preface this with a 3D FPS and RPG shaped exception to the rule; RPGs go hand in hand with information and statistical overload. All that stuff needs to go somewhere so it's sayonara screen space. That's forgivable in the days before coders devised more innovative ways to selectively conceal it.

Each of these genres were cutting edge in the late eighties and early nineties and needed a lot of resources to run smoothly. Again the casualty was the downtrodden playfield since reducing it meant you could maintain a smooth frame rate and still produce a game that was possibly-maybe worth playing -ish.

For other genres, there was no excuse, and it's these I intend to focus on in my top 10 countdown of the most unwarranted, overblown HUDs in Amiga games.

10. Strider II (1990) - developed by Tiertex, published by U.S. Gold/Capcom



Highly lauded, innovative side-scrolling platform game series originally released for the CP System arcade hardware in 1989 by Capcom, and subsequently ported to every system on the planet... and possibly some intergalactic ones too.

While much was lost in translation, the home ports were all met with a positive reception... which of course casts doubt on my 'mega HUD = abysmal game' theory. Yeah well, it's still a waste of space, and Hiryu's mother was a hamster and your father smelt of elderberries, so there.

The Strider I HUD was an unwieldy behemoth too, but II is ahead by a whisker.

9. 5th Gear (1990) - developed by Microwish Software, published by Hewson



A top-down illegal racing game where your goal is to reach a 'turn here' sign at the end of each level and... well, do precisely what it says until you arrive right back at square one. Riveting!

You'd be forgiven for thinking it's illegal because the game is criminally sub-par, but no, it has to do with your vehicle being armed with a weapon designed to obliterate the opposing drivers.

Gremlin's Super Cars - released in the same year - leaves this dross choking on its dust.

8. Wind Surf Willy (1988) - developed by Andre Rocques, published by Silmarils



If you ever get your sail to stand up you'll wonder why you even bothered.

I'm guessing the four people in the bottom panel are judging your performance, though the only indication they give as to whether or not they approve emerges a couple of seconds before the timer runs down. Even then only their mouths twitch a bit. I don't think an aghast 'O' expression is a positive sign.

I don't want to know why the sea looks like brown sludge. Oh, and there's no music, and only a single sound effect, which I think is supposed to simulate the wind, but reminds me of

one of those ancient spinning top toys where you push a rod down the centre of the spindle to activate it.

7. ATAX (1988) - developed by Eclipse Software Design, published by Ramware



A lacklustre Space Invaders clone with nails-scraping-a-blackboard sound effects and a 'countdown to boss' progress bar, which wastes even more precious screen space.

As the rebel leader you pilot the ATAX attack craft in your crusade to vanquish the 'oppressive Systems Government'. Hmmf, that government, always trying to crush the little people with its diabolical 'Systems', nothing changes.

Curiously, the mainstay of its offensive is balls of varying shapes, sizes and colours. You know, I imagine we'll emerge

from this skirmish without scratching up our paintwork too badly.

6. Joe Blade (1988) - developed by Colin Swinbourne and published by Players



A series of three, linear, flick-screen scrolling budget games. Only the first two appeared on the Amiga, the third being made available exclusively for the Spectrum and Amstrad CPC.

You play as a lone wolf commando or vigilante plodding through the levels duffing up baddies and rescuing innocent people caught up in the crossfire.

The first game is notorious for being one of the earliest to be relegated to the German 'Index' for containing gratuitous

violence, which just goes to show Germans *do* have a sense of humour after all.

The original game secures the plaudit owing to its letterbox aspect, in addition to the presence of a perma-title... even so, it was a close call!

5. Freddy Hardest in South Manhattan (1989) - developed by Iron Byte, published by Dinamic Software



An atrocious side-scrolling beat-em-up with endlessly respawning baddies in the Kung-Fu Master mould. Freddy was released 5 years later, though doesn't advance the gameplay one iota.

It permanently displays the games' title in the upper HUD and two dragons and a picture of your character's face in the lower HUD... none of which so much as twitch throughout the

entirety of the game (which incidentally can be completed in ten minutes).

It was re-released by Codemasters as 'The Guardian Angel' for reasons that probably wouldn't stand up in the European Court of Human Rights.

4. Flight Path 737 (1987) - developed by Digigraphic, published by Anco



If you're into flight sims and - virtually speaking - any aircraft on the planet is at your disposal, would you really choose to fly a cumbersome passenger jet?

Take off, ascend a bit, descend to another runway and land safely. I suppose with a playfield that shape you could always pretend you're wearing an ironmonger's mask and welding

together an ornamental model of an F-14A Tomcat for your mantle-piece.

3. 1000cc Turbo (1990) - developed by Max Design, published by Impressions



The coder behind this one must be a magician in his spare time because he's managed to make half the screen disappear in a puff of smoke!

It's not even clear that the bike console you see in the lower pane belongs to the bike you are actually riding in the upper pane because you can't see any road beneath it, just a solid blue backdrop. Is it standing stationary in a showroom somewhere?

I can't even stand split-screen two-player games where hacking the playfield in half like this is an absolute necessity.

The biscuit has well and truly been taken... and chewed a bit... and spat back out again in disgust.

2. Red Heat (1989) - developed by Special FX, published by Ocean Worldwide

Playing as Soviet detective, Ivan Danko (Arnie Schwarzenegger), it's your objective to mosey on over to Chicago to root out the downright naughty drug-dealing meanie, Victor Rosta.

The game opens with an animated approximation of James Belushi's character, detective Art Ridzik, who serves to relay your mission briefing. 'Approximation' is the keyword here - rather than pay an animator to inject some semblance of natural movement into his mouth muscles, Ocean decided in their infinite wisdom that the way to go would be to have his jaw repeatedly descend by a few pixels and then snap back into position to simulate speaking, leaving an intermittent thin sliver of black banding where his chin used to be connected to his face. Save for having a hand inserted up his derriere, he's been transmogrified into a ventriloquist's dummy, it's *that* bad.



Red Heat is a scrolling beat-em-up - which unconventionally for the genre - sees you travel from right to left much of the time, punching, head-butting or shooting your way out of mischief. You pitch your wits against a coterie of adversaries including an oft-recycled Sly Stallone lookalike, and more perplexingly, a continuous stream of rocks that 'fall' horizontally without succumbing to any gravitational pull.

As you can see, there's no good reason for the playing window to have been crammed into widescreen letterbox mode seeing as the 'HUD' is completely barren of any useful information, not even a self-congratulatory 'we made this' banner of any kind... not that you'd want to draw attention to this if you did!



You can't even argue that Ocean were going for the comedy censorship angle because if you look closely you'll see all the guys in the sauna are wearing manhood dignity-preserving towel sarongs which tie around the waist leaving the backside exposed. In any case, once Arnie gets dressed and we progress to the office level, the screen remains in letterbox mode.

Just when you think the game can't possibly get any more wretched, there's a button-mashing 'rock crushing' stage. *No idea!*

1. Dead Breath (1992) - developed by Ozkan Huvaj, published by Locus Design



A point and click 'graphic' adventure comprising static pictures and amongst the most woeful English I've ever had the misfortune to witness in a computer game.

"It's standing magnificently in front of me. I'm effected from its greatness. I'm now full of sense."

My sentiments exactly! Couldn't have said it better myself.

I've just been accused of being stupid by a talking dog who intends to "eat me at his birthday party". I think that sounds preferable to playing this game. Ketchup or brown sauce?